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Fulbright Attacks U.S. Role in Laos

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The United States is spending \$150 million a year to supply, arm, train and transport a clandestine army of 36,000 men in Laos, Sen. J. W. Fulbright (D-Ark.) said yesterday.

This covert operation amounts to U.S. participation in a "well-fleshed-out war," the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee said in an interview.

"It seems to me to be most unusual and irregular—if not unconstitutional," Fulbright said.

The United States Central Intelligence Agency runs the operation, said Fulbright, "but it is simply an agent here," following executive branch orders.

"I want to make it very clear," said Fulbright, "that this is not in my view an undertaking by the CIA as such. The CIA is operating under orders of the National Security Council, and a committee which is appointed by the President—which is directly responsible to the President."

"It's not just this (Nixon) administration that is involved," said Fulbright, "but its predecessor (the Johnson administration) and its predecessor (the Kennedy administration)."

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A Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee, headed by Sen. Stuart Symington (D-Mo.) is currently holding closed hearings on U.S. involvement in Laos. It heard testimony yesterday from CIA Director Richard Helms. Fulbright declined to discuss the testimony of Helms or other witnesses. What is immediately significant, said Fulbright, is that press accounts are independently revealing the extent of U.S. involvement in Laos. He particularly cited a series of articles from Laos by Henry Kamm published earlier this week in The New York Times.

The information now available, said Fulbright, shows that: "We supply all of the arms, and training, the ammunition, and transportation from one area to another" for an army of 36,000 Meo tribesmen led by Gen. Vang Pao. He is a former sergeant in the French colonial army.

"This is a major operation," with costs running "in the neighborhood of \$150 to \$160 million in fiscal 1969."

"This force which we supply and train . . . is backed up by an enormous air force. I don't mean just helicopters, I mean the United States Air Force, operating out of Thailand."

"The United States role in the actual planning of combat operations in Laos is, 'I would suppose, a cooperative venture.' United States control of communications, which are doubly critical in such a guerrilla war, indicates that the Americans 'suggest, at least, to the general, where the fighting is to take place.'"

United States involvement

in the war on such a large scope, said Fulbright, "presents a dilemma of major proportions."

"I knew we were doing a little of this and a little of that" in Laos," said Fulbright, but "I had no idea it was a major operation of this kind."

"What strikes me most is that an operation of this size could be carried on without members of the Senate knowing it—and without the public knowing." He said that neither the Kennedy nor Johnson administrations, nor the Nixon administration, made an effort to inform the Congress about what was happening in Laos, "except for a couple of members in each House."

Learned From Press

"In a democracy," said Fulbright, "the people and their representatives are entitled to know what is going on." But in the case of Laos, he said, "we have learned a lot more from the press than we have from the government."

This is "not just a part of the Vietnamese war," said Fulbright. He was aware, he said, that U.S. planes were heavily engaged in bombing the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail which is used by North Vietnam to infiltrate men into South Vietnam, by passing through the panhandle portion of Laos.

The army of Meo tribesmen led by Vang Pao, said Fulbright, is engaged in a "regular civil war," for Laos, between the forces represented by Laotian Premier Souvanna Phouma and the forces of pro-Communist Prince Souvannavong, the Pathet Lao leader. Souvanna Phouma has said that about 50,000 North Vietnamese, however, are also involved along with the Pathet Lao.

Fulbright said that for him the question is whether "the difference between Souvanna Phouma and Souvannavong is so great as to involve this kind of (American) activity—the commitment of millions of dollars and our forces and prestige."

"I don't approve of this kind of activity at all," said Fulbright. "But if it is in the national security interest to do this, it seems to me it ought to be done by the regular U.S. army forces and not by an intelligence-gathering agency."

Fulbright said he is sure that the National Security Act which created the CIA "never contemplated this function" for the agency.

"What I hope the next step will be," said Fulbright, is that the record of testimony now being taken before the Symington subcommittee "should be given a minimum of 'sanitization' and be made public" for "the education of my colleagues in the Senate and the nation."

"Tacit Agreement"

The State Department was questioned yesterday by newsmen about Souvanna Phouma's remark to an interviewer last week that there is a "tacit agreement" for the United States to support the independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of his nation. Press Officer Robert J. McCloskey said "there is no defense agreement with Laos, written, stated or otherwise."

He said "the assistance which the U.S. government has provided to Laos" since 1964 "is permitted under Article 6 of the (Geneva) agreements of 1962" which was also signed by 13 other nations. McCloskey

declined to make any further comment on Souvanna's remarks.

The Geneva accords, however, also called for the withdrawal of all foreign troops and "foreign military personnel," who were defined to include "members of foreign military missions, foreign military advisers, experts, instructors, consultants, technicians, observers" and also "foreign civilians connected with the supply, maintenance, storing and utilization of war materials."

The United States has charged that North Vietnam violated this agreement from the first day. While officially the United States does not concede any American breach in the agreement, unofficially its position is that it, in turn, was obliged to help Laos.